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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of a study on the transition between preschool and school programs, focusing on early intervention programs for special needs children in New South Wales (NSW), Australia, and presents recommendations for policy makers in regard to transition programs in NSW. The study was based on a survey of 45 early childhood teachers and interviews within Greater Western Sydney, Australia, along with interviews of two preschool, two early intervention, and two kindergarten teachers. The results of quantitative analyses of data indicate that there are significant differences between the teachers' transition related beliefs and their practices on each of the identified conceptual subscales of Teaching and Learning, Family and Transition Management. Results indicated that teachers' own beliefs and practices were markedly different, and that there were teachers who were not yet aware of the 1994 guidelines for school transition programs promulgated by the NSW Department of School Education. Qualitative analysis indicated that while all teachers interviewed were positive about the idea of systematic transition processes, few had experienced them in operation. Furthermore, teachers reported a lack of communication between preschool and school programs. The paper recommends that the NSW Department of School Education hold further information sessions to ensure that all stakeholders are fully informed of the recommended transition process, and that inservice programs for early childhood teachers be given high priority. Contains 13 references. (MDM)

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Building the Bridges: Early Intervention to School

Paper presented at First Years of School Conference
Hobart, January 1996

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For all children, beginning school is a major milestone. It marks the change from a young child, to one who is beginning to grow up. The transitional period between home, pre school programs or early intervention and school, is one that requires planning and consideration. Continuity in this experience must take account of past experiences and modify new school experiences to minimise change and reduce stress (Briggs & Potter,1990).

Continuity is seen as the most essential element around which effective transitions revolve and its study is important because "most educational authorities now espouse continuity in transition in their policies and highlight the importance of liaison between pre-school, home and school. In practice, the quality of transition depends largely on the quality of the physical environments provided by those authorities, the quality of the teachers who are directly involved, that is, the early childhood teachers who receive the new entrants and the pre-school personnel responsible for the children in transition" (Briggs & Potter, 1990, 17), and the quality of transition management. For children with special needs continuity is critical between the services in which they have been involved and those they will commence as they may experience stress, and disruption to their learning, and continuity ensures successful adaption to the new environment (Johnson, Chandler, Kerns & Fowler, 1986; Fowler, Schwartz & Atwater, 1991).

If children have special needs there will be more services involved in transition, more careful planning is required, and the need for effective communication and continuity becomes a complex process. In recognition of these factors, transition policies and guidelines have been developed over the last few years in NSW (Brewer, O'Neill & Ellevsen, in press; KU Children's Services, 1994; Nsw Dept. of School Ed., 1994).

In recent years there has been a general growth in parental involvement on behalf of their children, as parents become more sophisticated consumers of services, knowing more about the dimensions of services that they and their children require. This growth has been parallelled in parental recognition of the need for early intervention if their child has special needs (Simeonsson & Bailey, 1990). Researchers stress the importance of family involvement in the process as being beneficial to the child, professionals, and families themselves (Johnson, Chandler, Kerns & Fowler,1986). When families approach the end of their years in early intervention, decisions must

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be made about school placement. A transition period ensues, which ideally, should begin twelve months before the child is to commence school. The stress of transitions can be reduced by the provision of essential information, resources and support during the transition which will ensure a higher level of satisfaction with the overall process (Fowler, Schwartz & Atwater, 1991; Rice & O'Brien, 1990).

In this paper and presentation continuity will be examined between pre school (including early intervention) and school programs. A recent study of early childhood teachers' beliefs and practices about the transition to school for children with special needs will be discussed. In the presentation, teachers' perceptions of problems in the transition to school will be related to guidelines for best practice in transition.

The Current Research

The present study was designed to provide a snapshot of current processes of transition to school for young children with special needs in NSW. As this is a relatively new area of study, with the need for theories to emerge, both qualitative and quantitative methods were used in an attempt to provide a rich and meaningful picture of the process and the people involved in it.

Anecdotal evidence and previous research (Brewer, 1995a) suggested dissatisfaction and concern amongst early childhood teachers in schools about the transition to school for children with special needs. Prominent writers in the field also call for examination of transition processes saying " the field of early childhood education needs to assess the extent to which transition planning procedures are or are not implemented, and whether their implementation makes a difference in services received" (Fowler, Schwartz & Atwater, 1991, p.143).

A representative sample of 45 early childhood teachers in Greater Western Sydney were involved in the study. The teachers came from 90 services for young children approached to participate. Services nominated the teachers who would complete a questionnaire to desribe their transition beliefs and practices. The questionnaire was used to obtain information on demographic details of participants and ratings of their beliefs and practices in the conceptual areas of Teaching and Learning, Families and Transition Management.

Following initial analysis of the questionnaire six elite interviews were conducted with teachers. Two pre school teachers (one Preschool one Long Day Care), two early intervention teachers and two Kindergarten teachers were selected for interviews. They were chosen from the respondents who had previously agreed to take part in further stages of this study.

Results

The results of **quantitative analyses** of data indicate that there are significant differences between the teachers' transition related beliefs and their practices on each of the identified conceptual subscales of Teaching and Learning, Family and Transition Management.

Results indicated that teachers' own beliefs and practices were markedly different, as predicted by the literature (Argryis & Schon, 1974). Further, as predicted, differences between teachers were related to the program in which teachers work (pre school, early intervention, Kindergarten)(e.g. Hains, Fowler, Schwartz & Kottwitz, 1989).

In 1994, following a process of community consultation, the NSW Department of School Education (DSE) formulated and subsequently introduced a set of guidelines for "parents and educators" involved with children with special needs undergoing the transition to school.

Teachers were asked about their awareness of the guidelines and their involvement in their implementation in 1994.

Results indicated that there are still teachers who do not know about the guidelines, and many who have not yet been involved in their implementation. Early intervention staff are the principle group who are taking responsibilty for their implementation with fewer pre school and Kindergarten teachers involved at present. There is general agreement as to their potential usefulness.

Qualitative analyses were intended to further investigate issues that may help to explain the discontinuity between beliefs and practices revealed in empirical analyses. While all teachers interviewed were positive about the idea of systematic transition processes, few had experienced them in operation. Further, problems in many of the essential elements of transition were described. Teachers reported a lack of communication between pre school and school programs. As a pre-requisite of continuity is effective communication, this study has highligted areas of concern.

Best practice guidelines were developed from the literature and from current NSW transition policies (Brewer, 1995b) (see Table 1). Teachers' perceptions of their experiences during the transition process have been analysed and in this presentation the problems they encountered in the transition process have been outlined and aligned to best practice principles.

Table 1
Best practice in the transition to school.

1. transition requires a longitudinal plan with a written timeline

2. transition has a goal of smooth/efficient movement from one program to the next

3. transition is a process that includes preparation, implementation and follow up

4. transition has a philosophy that movement to the next program implies movement to an program that is inclusive or less restrictive than the previous program

5. transition involves transdisciplinary teaming in which all personnel are aware of the transition process
6. families receive support and information to enable them to participate as equal partners in planning transition
7. developmentally appropriate assessment and curriculum planning are incorporated into the transition process;
8. there is inter agency cooperation and transfer of information to all team participants
9. individualised transition plans are developed
10. transition is evaluated periodically by all team members
11. the transition team determines the communication policy and program of potential receiving programs

12. the transition team obtains information about the skills seen as important in the receiving program

13. the child is prepared for successful and independent inclusion in Kindergarten

14. information is sent to recieving program and receipt is verified

15. program continuity is ensured by providing developmentally appropriate curriculum for all age levels

16. The school prepares to successfully integrate and educate the entering child in the kindergarten and primary school mainstream

17. The school staff provide the necessary services to promote and support the child's placement, integration, and education in the kindergarten classroom and primary school mainstream

18. family consent is obtained for release of information

19. the child's eligibilty for transition and the receiving program is determined

20. Developing the IEP and IFSP in which family strengths and needs are determined

21. identification and organisation of the training and resources needed to

establish and support the transition process

22. Identifying program options and planning visits

*(adapted from Brewer, O'Neill & Ellevsen, in press;Conn-Powers, Ross-Allen & Holburn, 1990; Fowler, Schwartz & Atwater, 1991; Pinkerton, 1991; Rice & O'Brien, 1990)

Conclusions and recommendations

Quantitative data revealed differences between the beliefs and practices of all early childhood teachers that are of concern and need further investigation. From qualitative data significant concerns emerged in relation to best practice principles, and have been summarised below:

Significant Transition Concerns

- transition to school is not systematic and long term.
- families don't know what to expect from schools
- families are not treated as partners in decision making
- school policies and procedures are not readily available and known by all stakeholders in transition
- pre school teachers do not know what happens in schools
- families not in early intervention programs are at a disadvantage for transition
- discontinuity of curriculum, physical environment and teaching strategies between pre school and school exist.
- schools don't initiate or encourage links with pre school programs.
- schools don't clearly identify their expectations
- information from pre schools is not sent or passed on, through schools, to Kindergarten teachers.
- Kindergarten teachers are unsure about their role with families.
- Kindergarten teachers need more specific knowledge
- there is discontinuity of support and therapy when children commence school
- there is insufficient classroom support.

Implications for teachers

The findings suggest that continuity in and between programs is not being achieved. Detailed analysis of results examined in the light of best practice suggest a number of key points for teachers to incorporate into their practices:

Participate in detailed examination to facilitate understanding of why strongly held beliefs about best practices related to transition and inclusion are not reflected in comensurate levels of highly frequent practices. If teachers are saying they believe strongly in transition principles guided by best practice standards, then ideally, they should be converting these beliefs into classroom practice. If they are not doing this they are compromising their own beliefs. Further understanding of this mismatch is needed.

Articulate their beliefs and give comprehensive descriptions of their practices as an integral part of the process of matching beliefs to practices. To facilitate this, staff development programs leading to reflective teaching practices should be fostered. These should encourage and enable a greater depth of knowledge and understanding about teaching and learning processes in early childhood classrooms. Further to this, specific application of these methods should be adapted to work with children with special needs. Part of the process should be the development of teachers' abilities to articulate the foundations and processes of their programs. This will enable them to communicate effectively with other programs involved in transition processes. Further to, and resulting from this communication, all teachers must be prepared to make the compromises and program adaptations that are necessary to ensure that children experience continuity from one program to the next.

See, in conjunction with policy makers, the effective transition of children as high priority, regardless of program. To this end, they should accept and assume responsibility for initiating communication with other programs. They should ask for and become involved in formal transition processes whenever it is possible.

Recommendations for policy makers

- To ensure the training and provision of personnel who are responsible for coordinating the transition to school for individual children and who are available for every school, as well as other transition stakeholders, in order to ensure that transition processes operate according to best practice guidelines.

- That all pre school and school programs develop and participate in formal transition processes for all children with special needs who will commence Kindergarten. This participation should acknowledge and incorporate principles of best practice in the transition to school.

- That the NSW Department of School Education (DSE), in full consultation and cooperation with the pre school sector, continues to develop, implement and evaluate the formal transition to school processes that have commenced.

- To facilitate this implementation it is recommended that NSW DSE hold further information sessions to ensure that all stakeholders - particularly families and early childhood teachers are fully informed of recommended transition processes. It is important that school counsellors and support teachers as well as Kindergarten teachers are included as important stakeholders in the transition process.

- Inservice programs that are planned and evaluated in consultation with early childhood teachers should be given high priority in the interest of greater teacher confidence and knowledge of transition and particularly, inclusion practices.

- Teachers' concerns about support and resourcing need to be heard, valued and acted

upon wherever possible in order to develop the confidence of stakeholders in the ability of schools to meet the needs of children with special needs participating in the transition to school.

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This paper will present the results of research carried out during 1994 and 1995. The research was conducted with teachers in NSW. The main focus of the research is to investigate continuity during the transition of children with special needs from early intervention services into Kindergarten at school. Participants in the research were pre school and early intervention teachers as well as Kindergarten (school) teachers. A survey was conducted which looked at the beliefs and practices of these teachers regarding teaching and learning, families and transition management. Research results will be presented.

This research is important as increasingly, transitions are seen as being important in the lives of families and children. The transition to school is recognised as being stressful, and particularly so for the families of children with special needs. This research looks at the question of continuity for families as they undergo this transition. The researcher makes recommendations aimed at facilitating the provision of more effective transitions in the future.

The session will be an interactive presentation which aims to review past research and present findings and conclusions of new research in discussion with participants about their own experiences and feelings on the transition to school for children with special needs.